

# Exploring Competence Based Education (CBE) in Rural Secondary Schools in Tanzania: English Language Teachers' Conceptions and Experiences

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## Abstract

This study aimed at getting an insight on the implementation of Competence Based Education in Tanzania (CBE) in Tanzania. A study was conducted in Changchun, Jilin in China due to limited time the researcher had. The study was guided by the following research objective; specifically this study did the following; to assess the knowledge that rural secondary school teachers of English have on CBE, to explore the extent they use CBE in their day to day practice and to identify challenges that they encounter in the course of implementing CBE. Three research questions guided the study; what do rural secondary school teachers understand about CBE? To what extent do they use it in their day to day teaching practice? What are rural secondary school teachers' perceptions of the challenges in implementing CBE in English subject? The study employed a qualitative research design, semi structured interview guide was used as a tool for data collection. It involved a study sample of three Tanzanian students. The findings revealed that teachers have knowledge of CBE and the mostly preferred teaching techniques are question and answers and occasionally lecturing. Others include problem solving and project development. However, it was revealed that no changes have been made in terms of assessments. Moreover, challenges of big class sizes, limited time and lack of teaching resources such as textbooks were seen as hindering the implementation process. It was recommended that there has to be a top-down approach in changes of the curriculum in order to adhere to the mandated education philosophy and the new teaching paradigm.

**Keywords:** Competence based curriculum, Rural secondary schools, English teachers, Competence based language teaching

## 1. Introduction

This study sought to explore rural English language teachers' conceptions and experiences in implementation of the mandated curriculum which entails competence based approaches. The concept of concept based education is not a new phenomenon in the world and Tanzania in general. It has gained popularity in recent years as the decisions towards its implementation have been the order of the day in different country's education systems, Tanzania being among them. Competence based education has been defined differently by various authors. For example Mrowiski (1986) defined CBE as a component of the essential skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours which are required for effective performance of a real world task or activity. Richards and Rodgers (2001) defined competence as any attribute of an individual that contributes to the successful performance of a task, job, function or activity in an academic setting. Similarly, Mc Combs & Whistler (1997), Weimer, (2002), described learner centred method as an autonomous self directed learning which make learners not only participate in what, how and when to learn but also constructing their own learning experiences. Moreover, competence based education has also been defined as organisation of everything in an educational system around what is essential for all students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experience (Spardy, 1994, Richards and Rodgers, 2001). In this sense, CBE is measuring learning rather than the time spent in that entity. Student's progress is monitored for a particular subject disregarding the time that it costs teaching that subject (Oyugi, 2015). This means that students progress is not evaluated in the amount of time spent in the classroom, rather on the actual demonstration of the learned skills, students are allowed to learn and progress at their own pace. Therefore, CBE is simply an outcome based approach which geared towards changes in teaching and learning approaches as a whole. It is based on a set of outcomes that are derived from an analysis of tasks typically required of students in life situations.

## 2. Theories underpinning CBE

This study based under constructivist theories which have its roots from famous theorists like Jean Piaget (1952), John Dewey (1929), Vygotsky (1978), Bruner (1966) (Thobias, 2010). Constructivism is an epistemology, a learning or meaning making theory that offers an explanation of the nature of knowledge and how human beings learn and capitalizes on learner's abilities to construct viable knowledge and fosters discovery learning (Hartfield, 2010 in Kantar, 2013). A core notion of constructivism is that individuals live in the world of their own personal and their own experiences (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005). Hence, individual learning experiences plays a vital role in construction of this knowledge because knowledge cannot live on its physical form and out of specific

entity (Qiong, 2010). Knowledge is acquired through involvement with the content instead of imitation or repetition. This result to a shift in paradigm from traditional teaching paradigm where teachers explain, analyze and introduce too much thus passive received knowledge by students (Qiong, 2010) to focusing on how students learn (Bilimoria & Wheeler, 1995, Weimer, 2002). Development of CBE in Tanzania was a move towards improving education (Ogondiek 2005). This means that the teacher centred curriculum did not specify competencies that were required to be attained by students at the end of the course (URT, 2004). Hence the education system was producing graduates who were not employable after the school cycle. It has been recognized that skilled and knowledgeable labour force is a pre-requisite to the growth of the economy and country's development. Hence, CBE was perceived as the best approach for aligning education provided by the dynamic, social and economic demand (Paul, 2014). This in turn led to Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) to revise the secondary school curricular aiming at equipping graduates with sufficient knowledge and life skills so that they can survive in the modern world (Kitta & Tilya, 2010). The introduction of CBE in Tanzania led to changes in teaching and learning as well as modes of assessments in the education system (World Bank, 2011). The main behind the shift in teaching paradigm in Tanzania was to put the curriculum at the heart of what is taught and learnt alongside with constructivist methods of delivering the subject content. As a consequence, the curriculum was designed in such a way that it would help learners to become knowledge constructors and emphasizes the active role of teachers in the process of constructing this knowledge. This implies that the power of the teaching has been shifted from the teacher to the student (Barr & Tagg, 1995). With this then, various subject syllabi were subjected to change so that they conform with the changes in curricular. This study therefore, dealt particularly with the English competence based curriculum for secondary schools in Tanzania.

### *2.1 Competence Based Language Teaching (CBLT)*

In the field of language teaching and learning, Hart (2013) defines through constructivism the view that language learners should develop their understanding by engaging in the kinds of language activities that are found in real life rather than by learning lists of rules. CBLT therefore, is based on a functional and interactional perspective on the nature of language. It seeks to teach language in relation to social context in which it is used. CBLT is therefore an application of principles of CBE to a language setting (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The earliest application of CBLT was specifically for adult survival language programmes for immigrants (Griffith & Lim, 2014). By 1990s, CBLT has spread and been accepted in the U.S to the extent that refugees were required to attend some kind of competency based ESL programs to learn skills necessary to enable them to function in the society (Aurebach, 1986, Grognet & Crandal, 1982). Therefore, the same principles of CBE are now being used in English language curriculum in Tanzania.

### *2.2 English language teaching in Tanzania*

NBVCXSZAS In Tanzanian secondary schools, English is taught as a subject from form I to IV. It is a compulsory subject for ordinary levels and an optional subject for higher education levels. For many years, English language learners were taught about the language itself, they were not taught of how to use the language in different situations and according to contexts. That is why there was a need to change the curriculum to conform to constructivism ideas, where the student will be able to construct his or her own knowledge and use language in different situations. The teaching of this subject is mainly guided by a set of objectives as per Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT) 2005v directives.

### *2.3 Statement of the problem*

Tanzania has undergone several education reforms since its independence in 1961. Each reform had its objectives and its rationale for that sake. The recent educational reform is that of 2005, which involved changes in curriculum to conform to the paradigm shift. The intention was to build students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and the right competences that she / he can use to solve problems in his/ her daily life. There is a claim that by improving the syllabi, teaching and learning materials, teaching and learning activities and putting more emphasis on learner's autonomy, more effective learning will take place (Richard & Rodgers, 2001).

CBE is not a new phenomenon in Tanzania as it was initiated in 2005. Many studies have been done on the implementation of CBE in the country. These studies have dwelt on the general opinions of secondary school teachers (Kombo & Mwandaji, 2015), perceptions of pre service teachers (Paul, 2014, Kitta & Tilya, 2010, and Kafyulilo et al, 2012). Some studies have discussed about secondary school teachers in science education (Osaki, 2004). Other studies specified in disciplines such as biology (Kahwa, 2009), Mathematics (Mangilima, 2012, & Shemweleka, 2008), physics (Timothy, 2011) and geography (Mtitu, 2014). These studies have all been done in an urban setting and in different subjects. Moreover, even for those studies which focused on individual subjects, they have generalized results to represent other teachers in other disciplines which is not the case because each discipline has its own unique way of teaching it. Furthermore, studies which have dwelt with secondary school teachers in general have assumed that the case applies to all secondary school teachers

regardless of the subject and the context. Little is known of the status of the implementation of English language under CBE especially for secondary school teachers in a rural setting. This study therefore, sought to investigate implementation of CBE in language teaching in Tanzanian secondary schools in a rural setting, exploring teachers' conceptions and experiences of the approach.

#### *2.4 Objectives and research questions of the study*

Specifically this study was guided by the following objectives; to assess the knowledge that rural secondary school teachers of English have on CBE, to explore the extent they use CBE in their day to day practice and identify challenges that they encounter in the course of implementing CBE. This study was guided by three research questions; what do rural secondary school teachers understand about CBE? To what extent do they use it in their day to day teaching practice? and what are rural secondary school teachers' perceptions of the challenges in implementing CBE in English subject?

### **3. Methodology**

This study was qualitative in nature because the researcher sought to understand meaning to what secondary school teachers of English understand the CBE in their context and how do they practice it in their day to day teaching as Merriam (2009) explains that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The study sample included three Tanzanian students who were purposeful selected as the researcher sought that they would be the key informants for the study and they would bring an insight in the development of the study later because they have participated in the implementation process for some time. The researcher used structured interview as a tool for data collection where an interview guide was used to collect data from the three respondents. This guide was partly adopted from previous researches and partly designed by the researcher in order to fit with her objectives and research questions. Interviews were conducted according to respondents' free time. Each interview used not less than thirty minutes.

#### *3.1 Data analysis and findings*

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of one's data. It involves scrutinizing the acquired information and making inferences (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). In this study therefore, data were analyzed qualitatively due to the nature of the research design used as Kumar (2005) observes that the way data is analyzed is largely determined by the research design.

Through content analysis the researcher was able to synthesize and search for the general pattern by grouping data into meaningful categories in accordance with her research questions and objectives. The information and data addressing a particular research question were put together and subdivided into coherent categories that helped in searching for the main themes which were later analyzed according to the research questions. Data were then coded, transcribed and labeled accordingly to present the findings.

Table I. Participant's Demographic information

Respondent	Age	Level of education	Teaching subject	Experience	Place of teaching
1	37	Masters	English	5 years	Njombe rural
2	42	Masters	English	7 years	Kisarawe rural
3	31	Masters	English	4 years	Kigoma rural

#### *3.2 Teachers' knowledge on CBE*

The findings revealed that rural secondary school teachers of English have some knowledge on CBE as they somehow managed to explain a bit about the elements that are embedded in the approach. Their inclusion of some elements that are embedded in CBE conforms to what Weddel (2006) contends that competence based education addresses what the learners are expected to do rather than what they are expected to learn about. Furthermore, they gave a similar answer concerning students' learning experience by associating it with the prior knowledge that a student come within the class, and that it can be used as a starting point by the teacher to guide students to construct their own knowledge. This is supported by Khalid and Azeem (2012) who claim that constructivism assume that all knowledge is constructed from the learners' previous knowledge regardless of how one is taught. However, the respondents claimed that the use of students learning experience depend on the level of the students and the class size.

#### *3.3 Practicality of CBE in rural English teachers' day to day teaching*

The findings revealed all three teachers prefer to use question and answer method most of the time. Occasionally, they use group work and brainstorming. However, all respondents said that they are sometimes forced to use lecture method especially in cases where the class size is so big and if a topic demands more explanations. These

findings differ with those of Mtitu (2014), Shemelekwa (2008) and Kahwa (2009) where teachers revealed the use of lecture method per se as the mode of their day to day teaching. It was also found out that most teachers frequently use oral questions soon after the normal teaching as an evaluation technique and sometimes they use written assignments depending on the topic. However, the respondents revealed that they were not sure whether their teaching and assessment techniques conforms CBE. The findings also discovered an added aspect which was not even thought of by the researcher, that the respondents were on the opinion that the mode of the national examination is still paper and pencil. It was also revealed that this mode of teaching is time consuming and that it is difficult to apply it because of big class sizes that most public school classes have.

### *3.4 Teachers' perceptions of challenges faced in implementing CBE*

All respondents revealed that one big challenge they face is the big class size and limited time are the main constraints that hinder the implementation of CBE. This conforms to what Bataineh and Tasnimi (2014) who observes that competence based approach is very expensive and usually not feasible because it consumes a lot of time to teach one aspect of the subject content.

## **4. Discussion of the findings**

The findings revealed that teachers have an understanding of what is entailed in the Competence Based Approach as they managed to define or mention some elements that are embedded in it. However, teachers seemed to differ in the way they perceive students learning experiences. It has also been found that learners' prior knowledge or experience is a very important aspect in enhancing a learner to construct new knowledge. However, it has been observed that this depends on the level of students' knowledge and size of the classroom. Furthermore, the findings revealed that these teachers preferred question and answers as their most applied teaching technique. However, due to unavoidable circumstances such as big classroom size and school context, sometimes teachers decide to apply lecture method. Moreover, techniques such as problem solving, project and group works are occasionally used depending on the circumstance and the subject at hand and some did not use them at all. Although teachers' techniques conforms CBE, results revealed that the mode of assessment used by these teachers is still paper and pencil, meaning that it is still traditional based or content based. Moreover, even the National Examination of Tanzania is still using paper and pencil evaluation type of assessment. It has been found that the most constraint that hinders the implementation of CBE is the limited time in its implementation, big classroom size and lack of textbooks.

## **5. Conclusion and recommendations**

In the light of the research findings, it can be concluded that although the respondents seem to have an idea of what constitutes CBE, they normally do not practice it in their day to day teaching. Their mode of teaching seems to be more traditional instead of being modernized so that it can concur with the mandated curriculum. This is because nothing seems to have been changed as the new curriculum does not seem to go hand in hand with improvement of other facilities such as teaching resources. It has also been concluded that, despite the little efforts teacher have to try implementing the new curriculum, they are hindered by less government efforts to improve the schools in terms of resources. From the above findings, it has been suggested that the government should urge the education institutions such as Teacher education colleges and universities to change or modify their curriculum so that they conform the mandated education philosophy. This way the instructors should be able to teach their students adhering to CBE and later these students will be able to implement the same in their schools. It was also recommended that as teaching methodologies are changed to conform CBE, the same should be done to make sure that the assessment system also changes to CBE. Furthermore, teachers should be given frequent professional development programmes that conform to the new curriculum. This will enable them to be up to date in terms of what they are obliged to teach in the mandated curriculum.

The researcher also recommends the following for further studies in this area

Other studies should be conducted to see if teachers are really willing to implement educational reforms and a comparison between urban and rural areas should be done in terms of how they carry on the implementation of the reforms. This will help to see the gap between these two settings and amendments are done.

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